

PIKES PEAK **BUSINESS**

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A sharp contrast

New doctors stray from the conventional office

By Pat Hill

Young pioneers in the evolving American health crisis, Drs. Sharp and Sharp, M.Ds. have set up camp in Woodland Park.

Family practitioners, Greg and Heather Sharp opened their joint practice last week at 300 Lake Street.

"We know a lot of people still go to the Springs for their medical care, but we think the hospital will change a lot of that," Greg said, referring to the Pikes Peak Regional Medical Center, which is under construction west of Woodland Park.

Ready to treat almost any ailment, the Sharps exclude the delivering of babies. "Because of malpractice we don't do obstetrics-gynecology. We'd have to see a certain volume of pregnant patients to pay the malpractice insurance," Greg said.

In this age of lawsuits, HMOs, PPOs, co-pays and no-pays, the physicians are in the vanguard of those who attempt to effect change within the system.

Beginning with a lean office diet, the Drs. Sharp have cut their overhead to zero, excluding the office rent. "There's no receptionist, no nurse and no transcripts," Heather said.

Added Greg, "We have our schedules, billing and patient records all on the computer. So we try to be a one-man show."

Statistics show that most doctors pay 65 percent of their income for office staff, Heather said. "So by doing everything ourselves we can decrease the number of patients we have to see and decrease the fee schedule," she added.

In a quiet slap at health insurance companies, the Sharps are making a statement by designing their own fee charts, without the co-pay, or hopefully, the no-pay.

As in the good ol' days, Sharp patients are asked to pay out of pocket, a result of visits without the rigmarole of referrals, regulations and paperwork.

The Sharps are hoping that the payment plan will attract



Photo by Pat Hill

Family practitioners, Drs. Greg and Heather Sharp opened a new office in Woodland Park.

those with insurance as well as those without.

"The challenge we have is educating people that, even though they have insurance, it still may be worth their while to come see us," Greg said.

The fees are graduated, depending on the patient's illness. For instance, for new patients with non-serious maladies, the initial visit is \$85 with subsequent visits \$46. The price includes a 25 percent discount for same-day payments.

If the payment schedule is successful, Sharp and Sharp have paved the way for what they view as a simpler lifestyle. "We won't have to see 20 to 28 patients a day, but about 11 a day," Heather said.

Recognizing the out-on-a-limb nature of what some might view as idealistic, the Sharps accept payments from Anthem Blue Cross/Blue Shield. They are considering adding others.

For small business owners, who are increasingly unable to

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provide health insurance for their employees, the Sharps support health savings accounts.

"HSAs take the expense off the shoulders of business owners and put it on the patients. That money carries over from year to year and is actually savings for your medical expenses," Greg said.

An election issue this year, with the Bush administration in favor of individual HSAs, the Sharps are hopeful the savings accounts will puncture the ballooning American health crisis.

"We offer a higher level of care so that people want to come and see us because it's their money," Greg said. "We're charging less - we want to be competitive, not only for the quality of service but also for the price."

The downside of the accounts, which today are only provided by employers, is the normally high-deductibles, Greg said. "Say you put \$4,000 away a year - and instead

of paying premiums you put it in a health savings account. If you have \$4,000 deductible, you're covered after that."

The Sharps are hoping to cater to the HSA patient. "That's the future, I think. People are going to be forced into a higher deductible and HSAs. Usually they go together, but not always."

Married since 1997, the Sharps met while each was in medical school at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo. After three years of residency at a hospital in Columbia, Mo., they practiced a year at a clinic in Alamosa.

Distinguished by their pioneer spirit, their commitment to providing quality health care, the Sharps also make house calls, a throwback to Greg's youth. "I grew up in rural New Jersey, where my father, David Sharp, had an office in our home," he said.

The Sharps are the parents of one-year-old Helen Alexandria. To make an appointment, call 686-8844.